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SUBJECT: SARG OPPOSITIONIST RIAD TURK SPEAKS OF LONG-TERM  
PROGRESS/SHORT-TERM CRACKDOWNS

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 ban d d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Damascus Declaration National Council Leader Riad Turk believes Syria's expanding relations with European countries will ultimately work to the benefit of civil society and political opposition groups. In the short-term, however, the SARG is cracking down on Kurds and is likely to seek to make an example of National Council leaders now on trial. End Summary

¶2. (C) Riad Turk, long-time political Syrian opposition leader and a founding member of the Damascus Declaration National Council, told us September 21 that French President Sarkozy's visit to Damascus would work to the benefit of political freedom in Syria. Syria's indirect talks with Israel and its opening of diplomatic relations with Lebanon had helped to calm the region and had provided the Asad regime with some breathing space. In Turk's view, the net effect had been to provide incentives for the SARG to demonstrate restraint toward human rights leaders and political opposition leaders. Sarkozy's visit had increased regime confidence and prestige and demonstrated the benefits of opening to the West, according to Turk. He added that some businessmen and other elites were now quietly lobbying the regime to make "gestures" to the West, such as releasing DDNC leaders on trial.

¶3. (C) There was stiff resistance within the regime to taking such steps, however, notably within the security services, contended Turk. This resistance in no small part motivated the SARG's crackdown on Islamic groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood. The SARG had also launched a round-up of Kurdish leaders on a scale not seen since the 1980s, Turk remarked. The purpose of the crackdown was to keep Kurdish opposition parties off balance and to signal to other groups that the SARG would not tolerate open dissent.

¶4. (C) Turk said the DDNC trials are likely to continue for another two-to-three months before sentencing. He worried that leaders in prison, such as Riad Seif, were too optimistic regarding the chances of a not-guilty verdict. Turk predicted the DD leaders would likely receive sentences of one and three years. He argued there was a big difference between a one-year and a ten-year sentence, but only to the individual doing the time, not the principle at stake. In the event of guilty verdicts, Turk urged the U.S. and other countries to condemn this outcome publicly and privately.

¶5. (C) Over the medium-to-long term, Turk nonetheless remained optimistic that Syria's engagement of the West would result in more space for political expression in Syria. "Syria's desire to be accepted in polite company" would make it necessary for the regime to provide more political space,

he argued. He urged any new U.S. administration, be it Democratic or Republican, to maintain a tough position on human rights and political freedom as a part of any effort to engage Syria. Turk believed united pressure from Western countries would yield positive results, particularly if Syria saw progress on peace talks with Israel.

16. (C) In the meantime, Turk reported that the National Council continued to function. He said he personally was aware that the USG was seeking to provide assistance to prisoners' families and supported such efforts. He urged the USG not to limit its assistance to prisoners and their families, however. There were other activists whom the SARG was punishing without putting them in jail, and they too deserved support. The NNDC was trying to meet these needs, but USG could help the organization if it gave money for the group to disburse as it saw fit.

17. (C) Comment: Turk is one of a handful of DDNC members who remains under regime surveillance and is out of jail only because he served a 20-year sentence, much of it in solitary confinement. He acknowledges the weak state of the opposition but believes Western engagement of the regime will eventually edge the SARG towards political reforms, albeit slowly and reluctantly. As a staunch critic of U.S. policies in the region, Turk has in the past been resistant to the idea of U.S. assistance. His willingness to welcome U.S. funding represents a significant and welcome change that could help to facilitate more direct support of Syria's ailing opposition. End Comment.

CONNELLY